

Memoirs of a 'Mote in the Eye Capitalism'

Mean Things Happening in This Land by H.L. Mitchell. Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979, 358 pages, \$10.95.

"This book," Michael Harrington accurately notes in a respectful foreword, "is an extraordinary contribution to the history of American labor and socialist movements ... It is also a fascinating personal narrative which should reach a broad, non-scholarly audience with an engrossing, true-life tale."

Alas, the tale is apparently too "true-life" for the sensibilities of city-based book-review editors, nearly all of whom so far have greeted the publication of *Mean Things* with a characteristically metropolitan yawn. One guesses that in sampling the rural past these myopic gatekeepers of public opinion prefer sweet nostalgia to bitter roots—The Waltons' syrup to the sharecroppers' salt.

It was ever thus. Mitchell, now 73, has devoted a lifetime in pursuit of sympathy and sustenance for farmworkers, the most sorely oppressed and piously neglected of our fellow countrymen. It is sad but certainly not surprising that his honest and honorable account of that pursuit should now be similarly neglected. As "Mitch" would be the first to concede, nobody ever promised him a rose garden.

Mitchell's story focuses on his fellow sharecroppers—mainly those in Arkansas, Missouri and Alabama—and on his efforts to organize them in ways that might protect them, first from the reigning avarice of plantation landlords, and later from the fangs of such disparate dragons as New Deal reactionaries, Communist union infiltrators and George Meany. In these

With funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Rural America is now mapping out an educational program which will explore the cultural, political and historical implications of rural organizing efforts—both past and present.

As part of this planned program, a series of articles will appear in ruralamerica in conjunction with regional forums to be coordinated by local groups with Rural America's help.

This special two-page section is a "test flight" for this project, showing how we might use ruralamerica to examine other rural organizing efforts from a number of humanist perspectives. H.L. Mitchell, who authored an important chapter of rural organizing's past, is the subject of the first two pieces. Richard Margolis reviews Mitchell's just-published autobiography, and Deborah Bouton brings us up to date with an accompanying profile of rural labor's elder statesman.

Then, on page seven, author Fred Powledge, a native of the South who has traveled extensively in that region in recent years, offers a cogent analysis of the modern labor scene in the rural South and of the prospects for fulfilling Mitchell's dream of an organized labor force there.

Other issues we plan to treat within these pages in future issues include: how and why the coming together of rural people succeeded or failed in a particular region; the dynamics involved in organizing rural as opposed to metropolitan areas; and the chances of mobilizing rural people around crucial issues in the future.

We welcome your reactions to this first installment of what we hope will be a continuing dialogue on rural-organizing issues.

in America to live at once compassionately and militantly: it takes guts.

With his sidekick Clay East, Mitchell founded the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) in 1934, at a meeting of eleven white men and seven black men in a schoolhouse near Tyronza, Arkansas. The little band of cotton sharecroppers was instantly exposed to police harassment and lynch-mob threats, but they held on, and eventually the STFU had chapters in

as well as idealistic. The Southern white hegemony had long relied on racism to keep poor whites and blacks weak and divided. Only through interracial solidarity could Mitchell and his minions hope to make gains. The solidarity would show in small but significant ways. Once at a Tyronza meeting, a local lawman mocked an elderly white sharecropper for respectfully introducing E.B. McKinney, a black sharecropper, as "Mr. McKinney." "I'd

counter, as "the most attractive woman I had met anywhere.")

Less glowing is his opinion of Henry Wallace, F.D.R.'s secretary of agriculture during those early STFU days. Mitchell cannot forgive Wallace for having preached a new equality while practicing old-fashioned economic tyranny. In the fight for fair apportionment of cotton-allotment subsidies, Wallace sided with the plantation owners; the sharecroppers were left out in the cold.

After World War II, Mitchell steered his union into the AFL-CIO mainstream. It was never an entirely satisfactory arrangement, but the farmworkers were poor and weak; they needed to borrow strength from big labor. Mitchell liked the Reuthers, and he got along with William Green, the AFL president. But Green's assistant, George Meany, was another story. Meany once made an unfortunate speech to the rank, and-file farmworkers. As Mitchell tells it, "Meany sneered: 'I don't believe that the farmworkers of this country can be unionized. I don't believe any of you want to be organized.'"

Mitchell's memory is prodigious, and it appears to be near-letter perfect. What the reader occasionally feels lacking is not descriptive detail, which is rich, but analysis, which tends to be thin. We are mostly left to fend for ourselves, to draw our own conclusions, to make the essential connections between Mitchell's history and America's destiny—between Mitchell and Chavez, Wallace and Bob Bergland, "Mr. McKinney" and Dr. King.

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them, first from the reigning avarice of plantation landlords, and later from the fangs of such disparate dragons as New Deal reactionaries, Communist union infiltrators and George Meany. In these struggles he neither wholly succeeded nor wholly failed. As he observes, "I never built a lasting organization of people; I never had the problem of exercising power justly because I never had any power."

What he accomplished, against all odds, was to keep the protest pot boiling on behalf of the nation's farmworkers, and he did this in a climate that was fairly dripping with venom and bile. Reading this mixed chronicle of human hope and terror, one is forcibly reminded of what it always takes

eleven white men and seven black men in a schoolhouse near Tyronza, Arkansas. The little band of cotton sharecroppers was instantly exposed to police harrassment and lynch-mob threats, but they held on, and grew. Eventually the STFU had chapters in half a dozen Southern states and could claim a membership exceeding 50,000 (though Mitchell is appealingly forthright in admitting he was a slipshod counter).

Of the STFU's remarkable features, the most remarkable of all was that from its very beginnings—a full generation before Martin Luther King Jr. announced he had a dream—the union both preached and practiced racial integration. Mitchell is justifiably proud of this, and he amply demonstrates that the policy was pragmatic

make gains. The solidarity would show in small but significant ways. Once at a Tyronza meeting, a local lawman mocked an elderly white sharecropper for respectfully introducing E.B. McKinney, a black sharecropper, as "Mr. McKinney." "I'd rather call McKinney 'mister' than you," replied the old gentleman.

Mitchell, himself the son of a sharecropper, had spent his youth in Southern backwaters, but as the struggle heated up, he became a traveling man, lecturing widely and often hasting to New York and Washington to raise money or win friends. He got to know Norman Thomas and Eleanor Roosevelt, who aided his embattled cause, and he pays generous tribute to both. (He remembers Eleanor, on their first en-

A modest man, Mitchell imposes no lien on history and makes no claim on immortality. He says when he dies his body will be cremated and the ashes scattered over eastern Arkansas. "Then, if anyone of the plantation owners ... still survive, may they some day look up to the sky, and if something gets in their eyes, they can say, 'There is that damned Mitchell again.'"

A mote in the eye of capitalist America—that's our Mitch.

—RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

Richard Margolis, former editor of rural-america, is now trying to make it as a freelance writer in Connecticut.

H.L. Mitchell: A Pillar for the Power

H. L. Mitchell has a dream. It started back in the 1930s when he and seventeen other black and white sharecroppers formed the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) in hopes of doing something about the "mean things" happening to impoverished farmworkers in the South. Today, with the experience of 73 years guiding him, Mitchell maintains an unflinching belief that the day is soon coming when workers will own the resources they produce, when people will share equally in the wealth of the land, and when rural citizens will regain control over their lives.

There's good reason for Mitchell's faith that socialism will win out in the long run: he's not only witnessed dramatic changes that have improved the workers' lot, but he's helped bring those changes about for more than 50 years. His recently published book, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, tells the story both of his life as cofounder of the STFU in 1934 and of the labor movement at large—and what remains to be done. His commitment to help poor sharecroppers like himself break through the barriers of poverty, powerlessness and racism has carried through to this day, but on a different plane—the tenant farmers, for the most part, are gone, but the unjust system that bred them remains. The system *can* be fixed, he believes—but only if rural people organize.

Despite advances in workers' rights, however,



Mitchell believes that the corporate hammerlock on the American economy makes this job more difficult today—particularly in the South—than in his heyday. But he sees a golden opportunity to rally people behind

one banner as the nation's population reverses its year trend of migrating to the cities and returns to rural communities.

"This shift is extremely significant," he says from home in Montgomery, Alabama. "But if we are to make the most of it, it will require a different type of organization than any that exist today—something that will mobilize rural people spontaneously as was done last year in Missouri when right-to-work legislation was defeated." It must be an ongoing organization that is both political and economic, he explains—one that would work toward fundamental changes rather than latching onto on just one issue and fading away once it is resolved.

Mitchell's ideal organization would be community based in rural areas. It would organize people at the precinct—where they vote—instead of by issue, but not just skim the surface, but delve into all the problems affecting people." It would draw its workers and members from the grassroots, not seeking funds from private foundations or government, he adds.

Although labor unions hold real promise, they are having a hard time these days, particularly in the South where anti-labor sentiment is rife. Despite all the problems, things were easier for unions right after the Depression when the STFU was born, he says.